

## George F. Will: The slow decline of America since LBJ launched the Great Society

Standing on his presidential limousine, Lyndon Johnson, campaigning in Providence, R.I., in September 1964, bellowed through a bullhorn: "We're in favor of a lot of things and we're against mighty few." This was a synopsis of what he had said four months earlier.

Fifty years ago this Thursday, at the University of Michigan, Johnson had proposed legislating into existence a Great Society. It would end poverty and racial injustice, "but that is just the beginning." It would "rebuild the entire urban United States" while fending off "boredom and restlessness," slaking "the hunger for community" and enhancing "the meaning of our lives" — all by assembling "the best thought and the broadest knowledge."

George F. Will writes a twice-weekly column on politics and domestic and foreign affairs. He began his column with The Post in 1974, and he received the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1977. He is also a contributor to XNews' daytime and primetime programming. [View Archive](#)

In 1964, 76 percent of Americans trusted government to do the right thing "just about always or most of the time"; today, 19 percent do. The former number is one reason Johnson did so much; the latter is one consequence of his doing so.

Barry Goldwater, Johnson's 1964 opponent who assumed that Americans would vote to have a third president in 14 months, suffered a landslide defeat. After voters rebuked FDR in 1938 for attempting to "pack" the Supreme Court, Republicans and Southern Democrats prevented any liberal legislating majority in Congress until 1965. That year, however, when 68 senators and 295 representatives were Democrats, Johnson was unfettered.

He remains, regarding government's role, much the most consequential 20th-century president. Indeed, the American Enterprise Institute's Nicholas Eberstadt, in his measured new booklet "The Great Society at Fifty: The Triumph and the Tragedy," says LBJ, more than FDR, "profoundly recast the common understanding of the ends of governance."

When Johnson became president in 1963, Social Security was America's only nationwide social program. His programs and those they subsequently legitimated put the nation on the path to the present, in which changed social norms — dependency on government has been destigmatized — have changed America's national character.

Between 1959 and 1966 — before the War on Poverty was implemented — the percentage of Americans living in poverty plunged by about one-third, from 22.4 to 14.7, slightly *lower* than in 2012. But, Eberstadt cautions, the poverty rate is “incorrigibly misleading” because government transfer payments have made income levels and consumption levels significantly different. Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, disability payments, heating assistance and other entitlements have, Eberstadt says, made income “a poor predictor of spending power for lower-income groups.” Stark material deprivation is now rare:

“By 2011 . . . average per capita housing space for people in poverty was higher than the U.S. average for 1980. . . . [Many] appliances were more common in officially impoverished homes in 2011 than in the typical American home of 1980. . . . DVD players, personal computers, and home Internet access are now typical in them — amenities not even the richest U.S. households could avail themselves of at the start of the War on Poverty.”

But the institutionalization of anti-poverty policy has been, Eberstadt says carefully, “attended” by the dramatic spread of a “tangle of pathologies.” Daniel Patrick Moynihan coined that phrase in his 1965 report calling attention to family disintegration among African Americans. The tangle, which now ensnares all races and ethnicities, includes welfare dependency and “flight from work.”

Twenty-nine percent of Americans — about 47 percent of blacks and 48 percent of Hispanics — live in households receiving means-tested benefits. And “the proportion of men 20 and older who are employed has dramatically and almost steadily dropped since the start of the War on Poverty, falling from 80.6 percent in January 1964 to 67.6 percent 50 years later.” Because work — independence, self-reliance — is essential to the culture of freedom, ominous developments have coincided with Great Society policies:

For every adult man ages 20 to 64 who is between jobs and looking for work, more than three are neither working nor seeking work, a trend that began with the Great Society. And what Eberstadt calls “the earthquake that shook family structure in the era of expansive anti-poverty policies” has seen out-of-wedlock births increase from 7.7 percent in 1965 to more than 40 percent in 2012, including 72 percent of black babies.

LBJ’s starkly bifurcated legacy includes the triumphant Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 — and the tragic aftermath of much of his other works. Eberstadt asks: Is it “simply a

coincidence" that male flight from work and family breakdown have coincided with Great Society policies, and that dependence on government is more widespread and perhaps more habitual than ever? Goldwater's insistent 1964 question is increasingly pertinent: "What's happening to this country of ours?"

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